

HEALTH

Consumer Questions and Answers About Beef Safety

What is "Mad Cow Disease" (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy)?

Mad Cow Disease is the layperson's name for Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE), a transmittable, slowly progressive, degenerative, fatal disease affecting the central nervous system of adult cattle.

Does BSE affect humans?

BSE is a disease that affects cattle. However, there is a disease similar to BSE called variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (vCJD), or vCJD, which is found in humans. There have been a small number of cases of vCJD reported, primarily in the United Kingdom, occurring in people who consumed beef that may have been contaminated with BSE. As of May 2003, there have been approximately 139 cases of vCJD worldwide. There is strong scientific evidence both epidemiological and laboratory that the agent that causes BSE in cattle is the agent that causes vCJD in people. The one reported case of vCJD in the United States was from a young woman who contracted the disease while residing in the UK. The symptoms appeared years later after the young woman moved to the U.S.

The disease, vCJD, which primarily affects younger persons, is very hard to diagnose until the disease has nearly run its course. In its early stages, the disease may manifest itself through neurologic symptoms, but it is not until the latter stages of the disease that brain abnormalities detectable by x-ray or MRI can be seen.

Is BSE occurring in the United States?

On December 23, 2003, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced a presumptive diagnosis of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE, or "mad cow" disease) in an adult Holstein cow from Washington State. Samples were taken from the cow on December 9 as part of USDA's BSE surveillance program. The BSE diagnosis was made on December 22 and 23 by histopathology and immunohistochemical testing at the National Veterinary Services Laboratory, Ames, Iowa. An international reference laboratory in Weybridge, England, confirmed the diagnosis on December 25. Preliminary trace-back based on an ear-tag identification number suggests that the BSE-infected cow was imported into the United States from Canada in August 2001.

For more information concerning Mad Cow Disease visit the United State Department of Agriculture website at www.usda.gov or the Center for Disease Control and Prevention at www.cdc.gov.

